

Cable
Text:

S E C R E T NICOSIA 01566

SIPDIS

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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0357
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RUCNFB/FBI WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAHLA/HOMELAND SECURITY CENTER WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC PRIORITY
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 07 NICOSIA 001566

SIPDIS

EUR/PGI (LREASOR/IWEINSTEIN), EUR/SE (KINGMANSON), EUR/ACE
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SUBJECT: EXTREMISM IN CYPRUS: (MOSTLY) "NO PROBLEM"

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[1](#)D. USDAO NICOSIA IIR 6 823 0118 05
[1](#)E. 04 NICOSIA 1754

Classified By: CDA Jane Zimmerman, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) This message is in reply to ref a tasking. The 31-year division of Cyprus has produced two separate, and quite distinct, populations and governing systems on the island. While the USG and the international community recognize the Republic of Cyprus as the sole sovereign government on the island, the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)" exercises de facto control over one third of the island's area and population, with the strong backing of Turkey and the 25,000-strong Turkish army stationed here. Due to the transfer of populations after the 1974 war, the vast majority of the island's Muslim population (roughly 250,000 out of a total population of just under 1 million) lives in the "TRNC," although a smaller number of third country Muslims also resides in the south. This cable deals with each side of the Green Line separately.

SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (S) The overwhelmingly secular Turkish Cypriot community in north Cyprus appears to have no sympathy for religious extremism, and the almost 30,000 foreign students in the "TRNC" appear mainly uninterested in radical Islam. Traditionally minded Turkish settlers make up nearly half the

population of the north, however. Although there is little evidence that Islamic radicalism has taken root in this community, there have been reports of extremist clerics visiting the north to teach and preach to the settlers. Discrimination against mainland Turks by Turkish Cypriots, the settlers' relative poverty and socio-economic marginalization, together with an increasing number of EU-bound illegal migrants from other Muslim countries, could serve as a catalyst for extremist sympathies. For the moment, however, local extremism in the north appears to be limited to marginal, far-right nationalist groups with limited influence. The "state's" tight control over mosques and religious education, bolstered by a heavy presence of Turkish security forces, appears to have minimized the danger of homegrown Islamic terrorism -- and has also helped keep KGK/Kongra-Gel at bay. But there are several potentially tempting targets in the north, including large numbers of British holiday makers. At the same time, the "TRNC's" vulnerability to money laundering makes it a potentially attractive place for terrorist financiers.

13. (S) Similarly, ROC authorities in the south have yet to come to grips with the porousness of their own borders and the security threat this could pose. Large numbers of UK/European tourists, along with UK military personnel and bases, represent a potentially tempting target for foreign militants in the south. While there is little evidence of extremists in the south, tensions between locals and third-country immigrants (some of whom are Muslim) bear watching. Meanwhile, Greek Cypriot authorities have allowed KGK/Kongra-Gel some room to maneuver in the south -- a result of the ROC's enmity toward Turkey, as well as a desire to remain useful to (and therefore safe from) Kurdish terrorism.
END SUMMARY.

SECULAR TURKISH CYPRIOTS: ONLY HALF THE EQUATION

14. (SBU) Turkish Cypriots make up a little over half of the north's population and their presence in Cyprus dates from the Ottoman conquest in 1571. Within this population, however, there is significant diversity; many Turkish Cypriots have European Janissary, Alevi, or even Greek Cypriot ancestry. It is perhaps due to this diverse and evolving ethnic mix that Turkish Cypriots have always practiced a very heterodox form of Islam.

15. (S) Mainly Sunni in name and by tradition, Turkish Cypriots are nonetheless overwhelmingly secular, and proudly point this out to anyone who asks. Their behavior bears out this assertion. With the exception of funerals or other special occasions, Turkish Cypriots rarely pray or visit mosques. Fasting at Ramadan is not uncommon, but restaurants do not close during the holiday. In fact, bars and cafes do a brisk business selling alcohol year-round, often right next door to mosques. Although it is impossible to rule out the existence of individual extremists in the community, as a group the Turkish Cypriots appear to offer infertile ground for Islamic extremism.

TURKISH SETTLERS: MORE TRADITIONAL, MORE MARGINALIZED

16. (C) In addition to the Turkish Cypriots, however, there are roughly 100,000 Anatolian settlers resident in the north (ref b), who arrived in several waves after the 1974 Turkish invasion. Some are now "TRNC" citizens, but the most recent arrivals, are often undocumented, unskilled, economic migrants hailing from eastern Turkey (especially the southeastern province of Hatay). A significant number speak Arabic as a first language, and "TRNC" officials guess that up to 20 percent are Kurdish.

17. (C) Some of these immigrants have integrated with Turkish Cypriots through intermarriage. Most remain outside the mainstream of Turkish Cypriot society, however, and mesh poorly with the secular and westernized local population.

Compared to Turkish Cypriots, settlers are significantly more religious and traditional. Headscarves are a common sight in settler areas, and settlers attend prayer services more regularly than Turkish Cypriots.

18. (S) Nonetheless, Turkish Cypriot officials do not believe that extremist Islamic ideology enjoys much support in the settler community at this time. A local demographer and immigration expert suggested to us that ethnic and religious diversity among settlers (who include traditional Sunnis along side "very tolerant" Syrian Alewives, Turkish Alevis, and Sufis) have so far helped prevent the crystallization of Islamist political parties or radical religious groups. This tracks with Post's own observations, especially of visa applicants. Few applicants from any community on Cyprus present suspicious travel histories or other potentially worrying signs of religious radicalism.

19. (S) The danger of extremism in the Turkish-origin population cannot be discounted entirely, however. Recent changes in "TRNC" immigration law have put the squeeze on Turkish immigrants, particularly those poor, unskilled workers who are in the country without documentation. There has been angry, if muted, reaction to dramatic scenes of deportation and the implementation of heavy fines on workers and their families who have overstayed in Cyprus. This -- coupled with ongoing discrimination Turkish settlers reportedly suffer at the hands of Turkish Cypriot employers, officials, and police -- could lay the foundation for |~rentful extremism among the more marginalized elements of the settler community.

110. (S) Meanwhile, there are occasional reports of extremists Imams entering north Cyprus to preach or teach to the settler community unofficially. Sometimes these are pro-Erbakan mainland clerics who enter through Turkey, but on at least one occasion in 2004 a group of radical clerics reportedly entered via the Greek Cypriot south. There is no indication that such extremists stay very long or attract much following, but they continue to make exploratory visits to the north.

AN UNKNOWN VARIABLE IN THE NORTH: STUDENTS AND MIGRANTS

111. (S) The third major group of Muslims in the north consists of temporary residents and transients. Most significant among these are nearly 23,000 foreign university students. This population which is likely to grow thanks to an increase in the number and capacity of the north's universities, and their increasing efforts to recruit foreign students. While a large majority of the north's foreign university students are from mainland Turkey, a significant number are from third countries -- including Muslim countries such as Iran, Syria, and the Gulf states. Turkish Cypriot officials admit that some of these third country nationals may be more inclined to religiosity than their Turkish or Turkish Cypriot classmates, but insist that there is no evidence of any Islamist groups present at "TRNC" universities.

112. (S) One lecturer at the north's largest university shares this view. He contends that students from "places like Iran or Pakistan" who come to the "TRNC" are drawn precisely because of the more liberal, secular nature of the north's universities -- and are therefore not inclined to support religious radicalism. A Turkish Cypriot demographer specializing in immigration told us that a "surprising number" of students, especially those from Iran, are in fact Christian. He went on to tell us that the "Palestinian Student Organization" (which he characterized as the most active foreign student group at the north's largest school, Eastern Mediterranean University) limits itself to discussion groups and occasional demonstrations about the plight of the Palestinians, but strikes a decidedly secular, Arab-nationalist line.

113. (S) Turkish Cypriot officials know less, however, about

the religious inclinations of the increasing number of third country transient migrants in the north -- many of whom use the "TRNC" as a stepping stone to get to the south (i.e., into the EU) where they can claim political asylum. These migrants come mainly from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (ref c), sometimes arriving through legal ports of entry on forged documents, sometimes bribing officials to let them through, and sometimes arriving on the Karpass Peninsula by boat from Turkey, Lebanon or Syria. They are reportedly housed for short periods in safe houses before trying to sneak south.

¶14. (S) Contacts from both the Turkish Embassy and the "TRNC government" express doubt that these migrants present much threat of religious extremism. The mayor of one Turkish Cypriot city with a large immigrant population explained that these migrants are more interested in keeping their heads down and slipping quickly into the EU than in causing trouble in the north. Nonetheless, there are an estimated 4,000 Qtkistanis, Afghans, and others who reside more or less permanently in the north -- either because they have not yet tried to cross south or because they prefer to remain in the north to study or work. These immigrants are harder for the Turkish Cypriot authorities to monitor, and it is unclear to what extent this population sympathizes with radical Islam.

OFFICIAL ISLAM IN THE NORTH -----i

¶15. (C) To the extent that radical Islam does exist in the north, it is likely confined to small groups on the margins of society. The "TRNC" mirrors the Turkish model of tight state control over an officially sanctioned system of mainstream Sunni mosques and religious instruction -- which is permitted only in "state" mosques and in elective courses at the public schools. The north's mosques are run by the "state" office in charge of religious affairs (Diyanet, headed by Ahmet Yonluer), which also oversees the curriculum of all Muslim religious education. Diyanet answers to the Evkaf organization, which oversees a large array of business and charity interests as well as the supervising the Diyanet. Evkaf, in turn, is run by a board of directors appointed by and responsible to the "TRNC prime minister."

¶16. (S) According to a contact at the Turkish Embassy, the majority of the "TRNC's" official Imams are appointed by the Turkish Cypriot Diyanet from among candidates approved by the Turkish government. Although there is also a small handful of Turkish Cypriot clerics, including Yonluer, most are Turkish government employees seconded to the "TRNC" -- and consequently have been vetted for extremist tendencies by the GOT. Turkish Cypriot Diyanet keeps a close eye on the country's spiritual leaders after they are appointed to make sure they do not threaten the "state" in their sermons or with the content of any religion courses they are authorized to teach.

¶17. (S) The state permits, but does not actively oversee, several smaller non-Sunni Muslim religious groups. These groups, by virtue of their tolerant (some would say heretical) approach to Islam, are thought to pose little threat of fundamentalism. Notable among them is the "Haci Bektas Veli" organization of Turkish- and Kurdish-origin Alevis (numbering up to 5,000), who enjoy warm relations with the "government" and have even been given Evkaf land by the authorities for religious use. Arab Alewives among the settler population, while theologically related to Turkish Alevis, do not participate in this organization, preferring instead a loosely arranged system of informal prayer and instruction centered in private homes. Sufis and other sects -- such as the Nakshibendi who are led by Turkish Cypriot "Sheikh" Nazim -- also operate independently, but with the consent of the authorities.

THE TURKISH ARMY: KEEPING THE LID ON -----

¶18. (S) Nonetheless, there are scattered rumors of more

radical religious groups in the north. One reliable foreign military officer reported to DAO there were currently four unofficial "madrassas" with suspected hard-line tendencies operating in the north (ref d). Such privately taught religion classes are occasionally uncovered and closed down -- or taken over by officially sanctioned Imams. In cases where the content of these classes is not considered dangerous, serious penalties for those who teach or attend are not common. Sometimes the reaction is more severe, however. One Turkish Cypriot official reported to us that "a few years ago," the Turkish military identified and infiltrated a settler-run "Erbakan-style" school in the Karpass Peninsula; the Turkish Cypriots subsequently closed the school and deported the teachers to Turkey

119. (S) These stories lend credence to the general impression most Turkish Cypriots have (and which Post shares) that the Turkish army keeps a close watch on potential Islamic extremism in the north. With 25,000-30,000 soldiers and police on the island, the ratio of security forces to the general population is extraordinarily high (roughly one soldier or cop for every 10 civilians). Furthermore, there are army installations at various locations throughout the north; few villages are very far from a Turkish base, and mosques all over the country are attended and closely watched by Turkish military personnel.

120. (S) As a result, very little is believed to escape the scrutiny of the Turkish army. Former leftist opposition activists -- now in "government" -- recount their own experiences being under close and effective surveillance by the security forces. Other Turkish Cypriot officials privately confirm that the Turkish army's Civil Affairs Branch continues to observe "dangerous" religious and student groups -- working closely with the Turkish Cypriots to infiltrate suspect organizations and deport troublemakers.

OTHER RADICALS UP NORTH: NATIONALISTS AND KONGRA-GEL

121. (S) It is worth noting that there are at least two other types of extremists who, though not motivated primarily by Islam, are present to some degree in the north. The first is KGK/Kongra-Gel, which is rumored to enjoy significant support among Kurdish-origin settlers. Turkish Cypriot officials do not believe there is a significant threat of KGK activity or attacks in the north, however, thanks largely to the heavy concentration of Turkish security forces who keep close tabs on practically every individual of Kurdish descent in the country. Nonetheless, KGK/Kongra-Gel is believed to use the north as a transit point for smuggling fighters and fund-raisers into the sympathetic Greek Cypriot south.

122. (S) In addition, there are several small, home-grown radical Turkish nationalist groups in the north, which occasionally conduct small-scale acts of violence such as the 2004 fire-bombing of a Greek Cypriot church in Morphou (ref f). The UHH (National Popular Movement), which was fingered EU@~PGI (LREASOR/IWEINSTEIN), EURO (KINGMANSON), EUR/ACE (SKUX), EUR/PPD (VWALKER), S/CT (MNOUMAN) E.O. 12958: DECL: 1.6XQAND 1.6X6 for the Morphou attack and some other incidents, is a shadowy organization of Turkish Cypriot veterans and radical nationalists with close ties to the reactionary former "President Rauf Denktash -- and allegedly to hard-line elements in the Turkish army and "deep state."

123. (S) The term "Grey Wolves" -- officially the name of the youth branch of the minuscule far-right MAP party -- is also commonly used to describe "the UHH and the loose cadre of young thugs (who are often unemployed with criminal records) who support the UHH and occasionally do its dirty work. While both groups have a track record of violence and are critical of the United States, neither the UHH nor the Grey Wolves appear to be a threat to American interests because: 1) their anger is focused mainly on the Greek Cypriots and on Turkish Cypriots who support peaceful unification of the island; and 2) they are held largely in check by the Turkish military, which currently supports an Annan-Plan style vision

for Cyprus.

GREEK CYPRIOTS: RELIGIOUS...

¶24. (C) Greek Cypriots who populate the south are, by and large, more religious than their Turkish Cypriot counterparts. Mainstream religious institutions and religious leaders play a role in politics that has no parallel in the north. Archbishop Makarios -- the original Ethnarch -- was both President of Cyprus and head of the Cypriot Orthodox Church until his death in 1977. The focal point of the church's interest in politics, however, is the Cyprus problem itself. Church leaders do not hesitate to take public positions on secular political issues. The Bishop of Kyrenia, for example, infamously warned that those who voted "yes" to the Annan Plan in the April 2004 referendum would go to hell.

... BUT NOT USUALLY DANGEROUS

¶25. (C) While largely conservative, even reactionary at times, mainstream church politics are hardly extreme and there is no reason to believe that there is any link to violence. The EOKA militants of the 1950s and 1960s are now mostly old men reminiscing about the twin struggles against the British and their Turkish Cypriot compatriots over a glass of Zivania. The only "home-grown" extremist group in the south is actually a Greek Import -- Xrisi Avgi or "Golden Dawn." Few in Cyprus view either the group or its goals as representing a significant threat. There was, however, one serious incident involving a member of Golden Dawn last July.

A known member of the organization, Christodoulos Nicolaides, attacked a Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot who were sitting together in a Nicosia cafe. Nicolaides was arrested and charged with assault and acting with intent to incite hostility between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. His trial is underway. A previously unknown group, the "Organization of Cypriot Nationalists" claimed responsibility for a grenade attack on the home of opposition party leader Nicos Anastasiades in 2004. Cypriot police discounted the credibility of the claim and the group has not been heard from since.

THIRD-COUNTRY RESIDENTS IN THE SOUTH

¶26. (C) Third-country nationals make up perhaps 10% of the population in the government-controlled south, but represent a significantly greater share of the potential threat of extremist violence. Many third-country nationals work in low-wage jobs in the services or construction industry. Reports of discrimination, harassment and exploitation are far from uncommon, and could serve as a catalyst for resentment between Cypriots and foreign workers.

¶27. (S) Although most of this population hails from the predominantly non-Muslim Philippines, Sri Lanka, and other EU member states, there are Muslims among the south's foreign workers -- as well as among the south's small population of foreign university students. There is one mosque holding services and catering to the local Muslim population in each of the three major cities: Nicosia, Limassol and Larnaca. Even on a Friday night, however, there are seldom more than 200 worshippers. None of the major mosques has any kind of reputation for hard-line politics or firebrand sermons, and contacts from British military intelligence report they know of no Muslims preaching extremist views in the ROC. It is likely that some Muslim clerics preach outside the mosques to small groups of believers in private homes, and we have heard reports of some Imams advocating a militant line. Tasos Tzionis, who in addition to being the President's Diplomatic Advisor is also formally the head of the Cypriot Intelligence Services, told us, however, that he does not view either the mainstream mosques or the itinerant clerics as representing any kind of security risk either for Cyprus or internationally.

¶28. (S) The single most worrisome extremist group active on Cyprus is Kongra Gel. Cyprus is primarily used for fund-raising and as a transit point, but there is some evidence that the KGK leadership is interested in using the Greek-Cypriot controlled part of the island as an R&R destination for front-line fighters the way that the PLO used Chile. The Kurdish community in the south is estimated at about 1500, a number that is negotiated directly between senior GOC officials and the local Kurdish leaders.

¶29. (S) The GOC puts loose boundaries on KGK activities -- many of which are conducted under the alleged auspices of the YKK Kurdish Cultural Center -- but keeps a watchful eye on the community's activities and takes active steps to reign in those it considers threatening or dangerous. Many of the Kurds in the south are asylees, something that the authorities use to justify their relative passivity.

¶30. (S) GOC attitudes towards Kongra Gel are complex. There is certainly an "enemy of my enemy" mentality related to Kongra Gel's traditional antagonism towards Ankara. More importantly, there is an overarching sense that while Kongra Gel may be misusing Cypriot hospitality, it is precisely the usefulness of Cyprus that insulates the island from any potential threat. Cracking down on KGK activities would, in their view, only risk stirring up a hornets' nest of problems.

ROC: POROUS "BORDERS"

¶31. (S) The sizable (by Cyprus standards) Kurdish presence also reflects a deeper security concern: the porous nature of the Green Line. For ideological and other reasons, the GOC is reluctant to take steps to strengthen controls along the Buffer Zone that might accelerate the calcification of the Green Line into a "border." But in practical terms, the UN-patrolled buffer zone now effectively is the EU's easternmost frontier. It is relatively easy for KGK personnel to travel from Turkey and "jump the fence" to claim asylum in the south. The number of asylum seekers in Cyprus has risen at a startling clip, almost certainly in response to Cyprus, accession to the EU. Between 2003 and 2005, asylum applications in Cyprus grew by 710%. There were 953 asylum applications in 2002 compared to more than 4,000 in the period from January-June 2005. Asylees in Cyprus are a relatively diverse group, but the largest number come from Sri Lanka, Georgia, Iran, Syria, Ukraine, Pakistan, Russia, Bangladesh, Gaza and China. The large and growing asylee community in Cyprus represents a source of potential recruits for extremist groups looking to extend their reach in Europe.

This will bear close watching as Cypriot authorities struggle to come to grips with an immigration challenge -- and potential security headache -- they are ill-prepared to handle.

COMMENT: TERRORISM POSSIBLE

¶32. (S) Post believes there is currently very little religious extremism on either side of the Green Line, but we do not rule out the possibility of Islamic radicals seeking to extend their influence -- or even stage attacks -- in EUR/PGI (LREASOR/IWEINSTEIN), E4S/SE (KINGMANSON), EUR/ACE either the "TRNC" or in the ROC-controlled south. Tensions between immigrants and locals, especially if egged on by extremists from outside, are a potential source of volatility.

¶33. (S) Furthermore, Cyprus is a target-rich environment. The high concentration of Turkish military in the north, generally thought of as a deterrent to attacks in there, could also attract the attention of either KGK/Kongra-Gel or radical Islamists. The "TRNC" is an easily accessible place for extremists to strike at official Turkish interests. In the south, two UK military bases, as well as British and

other allied soldiers who participate in UNFIYCP, are potential targets. Possible civilian targets are also easy to identify. On both sides of the island, large numbers of British/European holiday makers concentrate in coastal resort towns; a Bali-style attack is not unthinkable. Even if it is difficult for terrorist groups to organize, plan, and train in the north, there is very little to stop outside extremists -- such as those responsible for the recent attacks in nearby coastal Turkey -- from entering through the north and conducting operations here, especially if they have Turkish citizenship.

134. (S) Even if extremists do not opt to target Cyprus, the country could nonetheless figure in their plans for attacks elsewhere. Weak immigration controls, especially in the north, make the island a potential transit point for terrorists. Furthermore in the "TRNC," a lightly regulated banking sector and unsupervised casino industry could offer an attractive terrorist financing haven. Although we do not have information to suggest terrorist financing activity in the north, we understand that criminal elements involved in narcotic smuggling have already discovered the "TRNC," and are using the financial system there to launder illicit proceeds. END COMMENT.
ZIMMERMAN